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Enjoy Poverty: Humanitarianism and the Testimonial Function of Images

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ABSTRACT:

The overlap between production of humanitarian images and interventions in contexts of natural and manmade catastrophes is growing on a global scale. An increasingly close relationship exists between image production, news production and humanitarian industry. In this article we argue that this process is transforming the meaning of the social, political and ethical act of bearing witness. We analyze the epistemic and political implications of visual humanitarian testimony through the documentary film *Enjoy Poverty* (2008), shot in Congo by the Dutch artist Renzo Martens. Examining some of the key scenes of the film, we undertake an analysis of the visual culture of humanitarianism within which the contemporary production of sensational images of strong emotional impact is inscribed and justified. We maintain that rethinking testimonial debt in light of contemporary visual humanitarianism fundamentally means to acknowledge and explore the hierarchical relationship that visual humanitarianism creates between the witnesses, the victims, and the spectators. We conclude by arguing that *Enjoy Poverty* constitutes an attempt to generate a new visual, discursive and political horizon within which one can prevent the transformation of the testimonial relationship into a relationship of power.

KEYWORDS:

Humanitarianism – Testimony – Distant Suffering – Visual Humanitarianism – Debt/Credit

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The armed conflicts, environmental disasters and situations of extreme poverty that form the daily reality for a part of our planet are of interest to historians and novelists, journalists and filmmakers. Often this interest translates into the ethical, social and political act of bearing witness. This “testimony drive” has become almost tautological in our global present. Events that drastically alter social life in a given context and violently affect a human community are something that beg to be told about—and the suffering that accompanies them needs to be put into words and images. Natural and manmade catastrophes seem to have this ubiquitous capacity to generate a moral-testimonial urgency: one that results in the creation of a peculiar moral relationship between those who experience the catastrophes and those who observe, record and feel an ethical obligation to account for them.

Reflecting on the complexity of this relationship in the practice of historians, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1990, 143, 193) reformulated this “call” for testimony into the concept of *testimonial debt*. Ricoeur develops the concept in order to explain the ethical link between the subject of historical narrative and the victims of history:

Through documents and their critical examination of documents, historians are subject to what once was. They owe a *debt* to the past, a debt of recognition to the dead, that makes them insolvent debtors [...]. And does not the difficult law of creation, which is to “render” in the most perfect way the vision of the world that animates the narrative voice, simulates, to the point of being indistinguishable from it, history’s debt to the people of the past, to the dead? Debt for debt, who, the historian or the novelist, is the most insolvent?

Conceiving testimony in terms of duty and debt raises a series of questions about its inherently moral nature. Indeed, both duty and debts are categories whose fundamental characteristic is to establish a moral bond and obligation—who is solvent

and who is insolvent?—between social subjects. This relationship can assume different forms and political proclivities in the different contexts in which the question of testimonial debt becomes a political force shaping social practices. Thus, in order to be better understood, the function of testimonial debt should be contextualized and analyzed for what it does—and the way it does it—in its different ideological frameworks, historical moments and testimonial performances.

In this article we propose to rethink Ricoeur's concept of testimonial debt in light of the meaning that the activity of bearing witness has acquired in a specific moral universe: that of contemporary humanitarian practices. Insightful documentary-films like Hubert Sauper's *We come as friends* (2014) have shown how in contemporary conflict zones—like Sudan during its recent partition, after the Darfur conflict—international humanitarian interventions and operators often translate neo-colonial aspirations and are affected by the “saviors and survivors” syndrome (Mamdani 2010). Some important scholarly analysis have highlighted how the mandate of several international human rights and humanitarian NGOs has progressively shifted from the moral imperative of saving lives to that of bearing witness and producing new historical narrations through the testimonies of humanitarian operators (Fassin 2011, Weizman 2011). However, these works have paid less attention to what role *visual humanitarianism* plays in the humanitarian dispositive and its significance for the question of testimonial debt.

In order to address this point, we focus our attention on a specific figure of witness—the humanitarian witness—and on a specific technique of witnessing: through the production of images. We argue that rethinking testimonial debt fundamentally means to acknowledge and explore the hierarchical relationship that visual humanitarianism creates between the witnesses with a camera, the victims of violence and suffering

that become the object of its representation, and the spectators. Certainly, the inscription of testimony within the humanitarian frame implies a peculiar modulation of the gaze on its objects of representation (see Sliwinski 2011).

The nexus of visual testimony and humanitarianism raises a series of urgent questions, since the production of humanitarian images as testimony intrinsically risks being transformed into a rhetoric of “distant suffering” whose ultimate targets are compassionate spectators who live far away from the catastrophic events (Boltanski 1999). As highlighted by some recent studies, humanitarian testimony can constitute an attempt to reduce the distance between spectators and catastrophic events. This attempt often spectacularizes the latter and tries to produce an emotional identification with the victims: “The effectiveness of humanitarian rhetoric appears to depend on its apparent simplicity and directness of emotional address [...]. It erases distracting political or social detail that would complicate the duty to act.” (Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015, 6; see also Chouliaraki 2013). In other words, what humanitarian testimony produces as evidence of a situation of crisis so as to establish an affective relationship with distant spectators can easily erase or make marginal the social and political context of the crisis itself. Hollywood films like *Beyond Borders* (2003) and *Sahara* (2005)—in which the “humanitarian impulse” of the main characters overshadow and trivialize the socio-political space in which they operate—are clear examples of this elision. Regardless of their good intentions, photographers and filmmakers who respond to the call for testimony and go to or represent places affected by a natural or manmade catastrophe intrinsically face the paradoxical risk of neglecting the causes of the events at the basis of the call for testimony to which they responded.

In order to understand the visual humanitarian testimony, the moral bonds it generates and the risks it faces in expressing the question of testimonial debt, in this article we raise some fundamental questions about the epistemological-political mechanism of visual humanitarianism. What is the relationship between visual witnesses, victims and spectators in contemporary humanitarian situations? In what kind of epistemic, political and moral operations is this relationship rooted? What is the role of these operations in shaping our historical and political understanding of the contexts in which testimonial debt is performed? And how can a critique of the mechanism of visual humanitarianism be conducted without precluding the possibility of preserving the ethical and testimonial function of the gaze?

We address these questions by analyzing the documentary film *Enjoy Poverty* (2008), by the Dutch artist Renzo Martens, a cinematographic work that explicitly tackles the question of visual humanitarian testimony. This analysis guides us through the deconstruction of the visual culture of humanitarianism. We initially seek to identify how the film reconstructs the links between testimonial debt and humanitarian interventions in emergency situations. We show how several film sequences explain the specific “contract” that governs the relationship between the visual practices of humanitarian witnesses and those who are provided succour. We then examine the process of deconstructing the iconography of humanitarianism that Martens performs in his film and—through the story of a Congolese photographic atelier—the way he reveals the paradoxical mechanisms that characterize the production of humanitarian images. Finally, we build on the significance of the aesthetic, ethical and political maneuver carried out by the Dutch filmmaker in his film in order to explain how the critique of the tension between *testimonial function* and *humanitarian function* can generate a better understanding of the role of images in the humanitarian era, and

along with it, a horizon of self-determination for those who live in areas struck by natural or manmade catastrophes.

1. Debt of Testimony and Humanitarian Credit

In a refugee camp in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as UN troops watch on, humanitarian workers from IFAD—the UN agency for the growth of the agricultural sector in developing countries—are documenting their activities by taking photographs while essential goods are being delivered to the local people (Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

A white man in a large straw hat gets out of a fishing boat. As a guard stops him for an inspection, he introduces himself: Renzo Martens, “journalist”. The hand-held camera follows in a close-up of his face, using a reverse angle shot to represent the subjectivity of a gaze that penetrates the space, staring refugees in the eye. Once inside the refugee camp, the focus of the camera lowers, to settle behind a photojournalist who is busy filming a motionless man stripped to the waist inside his hut. “Fantastic!” says the photographer, checking the image on the display and gauging its effectiveness, its compliance with the standard (Figure 2). The movie camera follows his movement again, in search of a new object, and then moves back down onto the man and the grimace on his face, almost as if he were tired of playing that role. “*Nkómbó Nayo?* [What’s your name?]” asks Martens. “Richard,” replies a faint voice.

Insert Figure 2 about here

From the very first sequences of *Enjoy Poverty*, Martens chooses to record the visual practices of humanitarian testimony in the post-conflict reconstruction of Congo. His camera immediately focuses on the relationship between humanitarian intervention and the production of images, showing how the distinctions between humanitarian operators intervening in a crisis and witnesses who document the crisis through images have been blurred in contemporary humanitarian contexts. In these contexts, the photographer and the humanitarian worker do very similar things. They both act as witnesses and use the same media to communicate their humanitarian testimony to the rest of the world.

After this introduction to the Congolese humanitarian environment, Martens follows the work of professional reporters engaged in the area, from the moment they take their pictures to when they sell them. He deconstructs the romantic conception of testimonial debt and shows how in contemporary humanitarian contexts testimonial debt is hardly separable from the credit that the witnesses acquire by producing images of suffering. In the central sequence of the film, two reporters are framed from behind while taking long shots in a village that bears clear signs of death caused by the military conflict between the central government and the rebels. The sequence continues by showing the group as it abandons the devastated village, while the director starts a conversation with one of the photographers, an Italian who works for *Agence France Presse*. “May I ask how much you get for a photo?” Martens asks. “Of course: fifty dollars,” he answers. Crossing an area deeply marked by the conflict, with numerous corpses visible on the ground, the discussion continues and the

director begins to speak to other reporters, asking about their work. “The only stories considered of any interest are ones with negative elements,” explains a freelance cameraman, “There has to be a disaster, a humanitarian crisis or dead people....But it’s not up to me, it’s the market.”

Shortly afterwards, in the darkness of a cave, the camera returns to its position behind the Italian photographer (Figure 3). He is busy correcting the colour in Photoshop, while Martens asks about the ownership of the pictures. “I own them, I can use them for an exhibition or a book.” “And the people in the photographs,” insists the director, “do they also own the photos?” asks Martens. “No, because I took the pictures,” replies the Italian photographer. “I am the photographer. I am the one that turned that situation into a photograph.”

Insert Figure 3 about here

In these sequences dedicated to the work of professional reporters in contexts of humanitarian crisis, Martens frames them from behind (Figures 2 and 3). He does not adopt their points of view on the events. Rather, he tries to assume a critical analytical distance through the camera, framing the way the reporters navigate the Congolese catastrophe. He shows their aesthetic choices and how these choices follow the spectacular codes of humanitarian reportage: “there has to be a disaster, a humanitarian crisis or dead people...” In this way, the gaze of the film is able to understand and reveal the logics that regulate the reporters’ point of view on the events. The way the movie shots are framed makes the reporters the unwitting characters in the film. The logic that directs their gaze on the crisis in Congo is captured and exposed in its ideological and commercial implications by the gaze of

Martens' cinema (on the "positioning" of Martens' gaze in the film see Roelandt 2008, 181).

The extraordinary power that characterizes the entire film is the understanding that to conduct an inquiry into the functioning of the contemporary humanitarian system, what has to be put to work is the reflectiveness of the cinematic eye. The cinematic eye becomes an eye on the humanitarian eye. Indeed, *Enjoy Poverty* intercepts and "re-mediate" (Bolter and Grusin 2009) the humanitarian visual discourse in order to identify the instrumental logic that characterizes its testimonial functioning. Through its specific framing choice and reflectiveness, the film reveals the specific "contract" that governs the relationship between humanitarian witnesses, the images they produce for mass media, and those who are provided succor.

As Martens' interviewees admit, this contract is based on the formal and economic canons that regulate the market of the images of suffering. In places where the various witnesses who recount the events do not produce any spectacular images, it is rare to find and justify humanitarian intervention. The crisis, the investment of compassion, and the investment of funds that follows, expand in relation to the way the witnesses create the images of the crisis. But once they accept these canons and agree to produce images that satisfy the requirements of mass media broadcasts, or the needs for further funding on the part of human rights and humanitarian NGOs, humanitarian witnesses free themselves from the obligations of the call for testimony. The witnesses emancipate themselves from and neglect the imperative to document the social and political causes that produce suffering. They become "humanitarian witnesses" who agree to capitalize what they initially felt as debt into something else, into a credit. As a result of this process, they break what Ariella Azoulay (2008, 81)

calls the “civil contract of photography,” a concept by which Martens seems to be inspired in his film, and which Azoulay articulates as follows:

[The civil contract of photography is] a form of relation that exists and becomes valid only within and between the plurality of individuals who take part in it. Anyone who addresses others through photographs or takes the position of a photograph’s addressee, even if she is a stateless person who has lost her “right to have rights,” as in Arendt’s formulation, is nevertheless a citizen – a member in the citizenry of photography.

In *Enjoy Poverty*, visual humanitarian testimony emerges as a regime that breaks the relationship of reciprocity that constitutes the foundation of the civil contract of photography. It imposes a different set of relationships that seem more interested in the ownership of the images of suffering and the effect they have on their distant spectators than in restoring the political and ethical dignity of the subjects framed by the cameras. Debt is transformed into credit, showing the paradoxical link between ethics, politics and economy in contemporary humanitarian situations.

2. “Bolingto studio”: deconstructing the rhetoric and politics of suffering

In the second half of the film, Martens continues his deconstruction of the iconography and economy of distant suffering. However his focus shifts from humanitarian photographers to the subjects represented by visual humanitarianism, and on how the latter can articulate their own gaze within the discursive mechanism of political and testimonial debt. During a visit to a village, Martens stumbles across a curious sign on a wooden house: “*Bolingto studio. Express tout Parisien.*” Talking to some foreign professional reporters who are walking with him, the film director asks

about the meaning of the sign hung on what appears to be an abandoned store. A group of young Congolese men enter the scene and explain that the sign refers to the name of their company. They offer a wedding photography service and each picture earns them seventy-five cents.

After this meeting, as a part of the film, Martens decides to take on the role of photography and marketing teacher to these Congolese boys (Figure 4). The subsequent sequence intertwines framings of the Dutch artist from the bottom up with images of the group of students taking his photo-marketing class. From the formal point of view, the situation explicitly reproduces the paternalistic colonial posture that can be found in the activity of many international humanitarian agencies in the African continent.

Insert figure 4 about here

However, Martens' provocative class in photographic humanitarian marketing immediately acquires a parodic and deconstructive function. Instead of reiterating a "civilizing" function or transmitting the values of humanitarian photography, with his "critical mimicry" (Demos 2013, 105) he attempts to overthrow the system of values that lie behind the rules of production and circulation of images, along with the economic foundations of visual humanitarianism. Instead of teaching "good practices," he asks his young Congolese students some provocative questions aimed at problematizing their relationship with humanitarian agencies, with the photographers-witnesses who work for these agencies, and, ultimately, their condition as "victims." Who owns poverty? he asks. Who owns the image of poverty? Why continue to take pictures at family gatherings if the representation of suffering—of

which the Congolese people are “owners”—earns the photographer ten times as much?

After the impact of these provocative questions, the film shows the young wedding photographers improvising as reporters, searching for the most extreme expressions of suffering that beleaguer their country: from the extreme poverty of the housing to famished children about to die. The director constantly intervenes, suggesting the iconography and compositions most likely to tug at the heartstrings of the users of the pictures and to ensure visibility to the organizations working in the area. “If you don’t put the logos in the picture, it’s useless,” he explains to the boys as one of them uses a piece of cardboard bearing the words UNICEF as if it were a clapper board.

Insert figure 5 about here

As has been noted, this is perhaps the most cynical and problematic part of Martens’ film (Guerra, Keenan etc 2012, 8). Far from being a real training experience for a local agency in humanitarian context, the parody of photojournalism in the “school of photography” sequence is used to bring the deconstruction process of the humanitarian iconography to its extreme. Re-enacting the canon of visual humanitarianism with the Congolese amateur photographers, Martens shows how this canon tends towards *emotional effectiveness* rather than toward analysis of the political context in which the images are produced. Caught inside this structure, those who experience political violence seem prevented from liberating themselves from their condition of spectacularized passive victimhood.

Moreover, as shown in the last part of this sequence—in which the director and the Congolese photographers, with provocative naivety, offer to sell their pictures to a

representative of the humanitarian agency *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF)—the victims are excluded from the testimonial space, even when they try to produce their images in accordance with the humanitarian visual canon. Looking at their pictures, the MSF representative purports to be shocked at the immorality of young Congolese photographers aiming to profit from displaying the suffering of his patients. Nevertheless, in the same scene he admits to allowing Western reporters to take photographs in his hospitals: those same photos of Congolese victims that will then be used to raise funds and to reaffirm the moral credit that constitutes the essential condition of the organization's existence. Who owns poverty?

3. Honour the debt, rebuild a space of self-determination

A recurring frame in the film shows Martens and some African assistants carrying heavy metal cases while walking through the jungle. Because these images are not related to a clear narrative situation and seem to have a marginal background function, they are disorienting to the film spectator. However, these cases transported from one village to another contain an important message. In the second part of the journey, the artist Renzo Martens takes the lid off the box and extracts the single letters that form the neon installation ENJOY POVERTY. He connects it to a generator and lights up a night-time festival at a local village.

But what does “enjoy poverty” mean? How and why would anybody say something like that? As sometimes happens in contemporary arts, the concise nature of the message may well turn the entire installation into a mere provocation, an end in itself. By now, though, given the investigative process and critical diagnosis of the humanitarian testimony previously offered by the film, the viewer is capable of

reading and understanding the challenge of that neon sign—its ethical, civil and political scope. In a visual humanitarian regime like the one dissected by Martens, in which the civil contract of photography and documentary practices are systematically disregarded, the utterance “enjoy poverty” represents an attempt to break the moral-economic foundations of the regime and the exploitative contract on which it is based. It constitutes a rejection of the transformation of poverty from a social condition inscribed in a context of political violence into a means for reproducing humanitarian compassion at distance. It disrupts the moral frame through which (visual) humanitarianism construes the condition of *victim* and relegates the subjects of manmade or natural catastrophe to a passive role—a role in which they are deprived of the faculty to independently develop a political response to their condition, and are instead subjected to the assistance of international organizations and NGOs.

Enjoy Poverty tries to reverse the state of moral and economic dependence in which many of the Congolese citizens interviewed by Martens are trapped. In a context in which poverty acquires the shape of a stigmata, it should be claimed by the poor as a “resource,” thereby subverting the regime of humanitarian rations, by rejecting an attitude of gratitude towards the international organizations that supply them, and repoliticizing poverty.

In a certain way, with its provocations, Martens’ work addresses what Giorgio Agamben (the Italian philosopher who theorizes the concept of “bare life” in contemporary governmental paradigms) describes as the divorce between humanitarianism and politics. Visual humanitarianism plays an important role in this divorce:

The separation between humanitarianism and politics that we are experiencing today is the

extreme phase of the separation of the rights of man from the rights of the citizen. In the final analysis, however, humanitarian organizations – which today are more and more supported by international commissions – can only grasp human life in the figure of bare or sacred life, and therefore, despite themselves, maintain a secret solidarity with the very powers they ought to fight [...]. It takes only a glance at the recent publicity campaigns to gather funds for refugees from Rwanda to realize that human life is exclusively considered [...] as sacred life, that is to say which may be killed and sacrificed, and that only as such is it made into the object of aid and protection. The “imploring eyes” of the Rwandan child, whose photograph is shown to obtain money but who “is now becoming more and more difficult to find alive,” may well be the most telling contemporary cipher of the bare life that humanitarian organizations, in perfect symmetry with state power, need. A humanitarianism separated from politics cannot fail to reproduce the isolation of sacred life at the basis of sovereignty, and the camp – which is to say, the pure space of exception – is the biopolitical paradigm that it cannot master. (Agamben 1998, 133-134)

However, what is at stake in *Enjoy Poverty* is not the re-connection of humanitarianism and politics suggested by Agamben, but rather the necessity to shed light on the risks of transforming humanitarianism itself into a form of politics that levels the testimonial function. What remains of politics after it completely identifies with the humanitarian field and by so doing is transformed into an obliteration of the subjects struck by the catastrophe? What remains, of the moral credit enjoyed by humanitarian actors once they transform poverty into a question of distant suffering that can be healed through the reproduction of what Agamben calls the “imploring eyes”? And what remains of Ricoeur’s “testimonial debt” when those who bear witness tie themselves—both economically and aesthetically—to the apparatus of humanitarian assistance?

As has been effectively claimed in some interesting research on the function of images in the contemporary information circuit, the simple answer to the “call for testimony” is not sufficient to honor the debt contracted (see, e.g., Dinoi 2008; Montani 2010; Didi-Huberman 2010). What is asked of the photographer and the filmmaker is not so much the timely testimony of a given event in itself as the ability to develop forms of representation capable of restoring dignity to the subjects represented in film: to ensure the respect of their rights, but above all to safeguard the space of action and political self-determination of the people who are threatened by the condition of crisis.

With *Enjoy Poverty*, Martens takes up this complex aesthetic and political challenge. To do this, in many sequences he resorts to a *mise-en-scene* of himself as a counter-humanitarian superman. He does it when he interacts with the refugees in the opening scenes of the film; during the interviews with the foreign reporters; and in the experiment with Bolingo Studio. When he portrays himself during his investigation, he utilizes close-up and full close-up shots, recalling to spectators’ memory the authoritarian and lunatic character of Aguirre, the wrath of God, staged by Werner Herzog in 1972 (on the comparison between Martens and Aguirre see Fox 2009 and Charlesworth 2015).

Insert figure 6 about here

The way Martens honors his debt as a witness is inseparable from this peculiar approach and compositional mode. He develops a divorce between testimonial debt and humanitarianism through the grotesque and superman-like exasperation of humanitarian iconography and practices. He makes the viewer continuously aware of

the gap between his personal investigation (free to challenge morals) and the investigative canon of the reporters encountered along the way. He shows the obstacles to self-determination for the subjects who are represented by and live under a regime of visual humanitarianism.

This approach allows Martens to swim against the current in the flow of humanitarian images, deconstructing the visual culture within which they are articulated, and developing an ethically and politically sustainable form of testimony. We could say that in Martens' film the only witness worthy of the name is one who produces an image of the crisis that cannot be bought—and in turn “sold” to obtain credibility or credit—by any of the actors in the humanitarian sector, one who attempts to proclaim the urgent need for a space of self-determination in which the victims can develop a different status.

To *Enjoy poverty* ultimately means to reappropriate poverty and to take it away from humanitarian marketing. The aim of this process is also to generate a new visual culture: a new visual, discursive and political horizon within which one can prevent the transformation of the testimonial relationship into a relationship that is epistemologically, morally and politically hierarchical. This is perhaps the ultimate proposal of the film: to overcome the aporias that external witnesses to natural and manmade catastrophes continuously falls back into; and to open up a fully relational and reversible space in which photographers, videomakers and the subjects struck by a catastrophe can interact. In this kind of political space, the very concept of “testimonial debt” and its transformation into a relationship of power can be called into question so as to foster a process of self-determination.

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